On India’s Farms, a Plague of Suicide

By SOMINI SENGUPTA  SEPT. 19, 2006

BHADUMARI, India — Here in the center of India, on a gray Wednesday morning, a cotton farmer swallowed a bottle of pesticide and fell dead at the threshold of his small mud house.

The farmer, Anil Kondba Shende, 31, left behind a wife and two small sons, debts that his family knew about only vaguely and a soggy, ruined 3.5-acre patch of cotton plants that had been his only source of income.

Whether it was debt, shame or some other privation that drove Mr. Shende to kill himself rests with him alone. But his death was by no means an isolated one, and in it lay an alarming reminder of the crisis facing the Indian farmer.

Across the country in desperate pockets like this one, 17,107 farmers committed suicide in 2003, the most recent year for which government figures are available. Anecdotal reports suggest that the high rates are continuing.

Though the crisis has been building for years, it presents an increasingly thorny political challenge for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. High suicide rates and rural despair helped topple the previous government two years ago and put Mr. Singh in power.

Changes brought on by 15 years of economic reforms have opened Indian farmers to global competition and given them access to expensive and promising biotechnology, but not necessarily opened the way to higher prices, bank loans, irrigation or insurance against pests and rain.
Mr. Singh’s government, which has otherwise emerged as a strong ally of America, has become one of the loudest critics in the developing world of Washington’s $18 billion a year in subsidies to its own farmers, which have helped drive down the price of cotton for farmers like Mr. Shende.

At the same time, frustration is building in India with American multinational companies peddling costly, genetically modified seeds. They have made deep inroads in rural India — a vast and alluring market — bringing new opportunities but also new risks as Indian farmers pile up debt.

In this central Indian cotton-growing area, known as Vidarbha, the unofficial death toll from suicides, compiled by a local advocacy group and impossible to verify, was 767 in a 14-month period that ended in late August.

“The suicides are an extreme manifestation of some deep-seated problems which are now plaguing our agriculture,” said M. S. Swaminathan, the geneticist who was the scientific leader of India’s Green Revolution 40 years ago and is now chairman of the National Commission on Farmers. “They are climatic. They are economic. They are social.”

India’s economy may be soaring, but agriculture remains its Achilles’ heel, the source of livelihood for hundreds of millions of people but a fraction of the nation’s total economy and a symbol of its abiding difficulties.

In what some see as an ominous trend, food production, once India’s great pride, has failed to keep pace with the nation’s population growth in the last decade.

The cries of Indian farmers — or what Prime Minister Singh recently described as their “acute distress” — can hardly be neglected by the leaders of a country where two-thirds of people still live in the countryside.

Mr. Singh’s government has responded to the current crisis by promptly expanding rural credit and promising investments in rural infrastructure. It has also offered several quick fixes, including a $156 million package to rescue “suicide prone” districts across the country and a promise to expand rural credit, waive interest on existing bank loans and curb usurious informal moneylenders.
But pressure is building to do more. Many, including Mr. Swaminathan, the agricultural scientist, would like to see the government help farmers survive during crop failures or years of low world prices.

Subsidies, once a linchpin of Indian economic policy, have dried up for virtually everyone but the producers of staple food grains. Indian farmers now must compete or go under. To compete, many have turned to high-cost seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, which now line the shelves of even the tiniest village shops.

Monsanto, for instance, invented the genetically modified seeds that Mr. Shende planted, known as Bt cotton, which are resistant to bollworm infestation, the cotton farmer’s prime enemy. It says the seeds can reduce the use of pesticides by 25 percent.

The company has more than doubled its sales of Bt cotton here in the last year, but the expansion has been contentious. This year, a legal challenge from the government of the state of Andhra Pradesh forced Monsanto to slash the royalty it collected from the sale of its patented seeds in India. The company has appealed to the Indian Supreme Court.

The modified seeds can cost nearly twice as much as ordinary ones, and they have nudged many farmers toward taking on ever larger loans, often from moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates.

Virtually every cotton farmer in these parts, for instance, needs the assistance of someone like Chandrakant Agarwal, a veteran moneylender who charges 5 percent interest a month.

He collects his dues at harvest time, but exacts an extra premium, compelling farmers to sell their cotton to him at a price lower than it fetches on the market, pocketing the profit.

His collateral policy is nothing if not inventive. The borrower signs a blank official document that gives Mr. Agarwal the right to collect the farmer’s property at any time.
Business has boomed with the arrival of high-cost seeds and pesticides. “Many moneylenders have made a whole lot of money,” Mr. Agarwal said. “Farmers, many of them, are ruined.”

Indeed, one or two crop failures, an unexpected health expense or the marriage of a daughter have become that much more perilous in a livelihood where the risks are already high.

A government survey released last year found that 40 percent of farmers said they would abandon agriculture if they could. The study also found that farming represented less than half the income of farmer households.

Barely 4 percent of all farmers insure their crops. Nearly 60 percent of Indian agriculture still depends entirely on the rains, as in Mr. Shende’s case.

This year, waiting for a tardy monsoon, Mr. Shende sowed his fields three times with the genetically modified seeds made by Monsanto. Two batches of seed went to waste because the monsoon was late. When the rains finally arrived, they came down so hard that they flooded Mr. Shende’s low-lying field and destroyed his third and final batch.

Mr. Shende shouldered at least four debts at the time of his death: one from a bank, two procured on his behalf by his sisters and one from a local moneylender. The night before his suicide, he borrowed one last time. From a fellow villager, he took the equivalent of $9, roughly the cost of a one-liter bottle of pesticide, which he used to take his life.

Those like him with small holdings are particularly vulnerable. A study by Srijit Mishra, a professor at the Mumbai-based Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, found that more than half of the suicides in this part of the country were among farmers with less than five acres of land.

But even those who are prosperous by local standards are not immune. Manoj Chandurkar, 36, has 72 acres of cotton with genetically modified seeds and sorghum in a neighboring village called Waifad. Every year is a gamble, he said.
Each time, he takes out a loan, then another and then prays that the bollworms will stay away and the rains will be good. On his shoulders today sit three loans, bringing his total debt to $10,000, a vast sum here.

The study by Mr. Mishra found that 86.5 percent of farmers who took their own lives were indebted — their average debt was about $835 — and 40 percent had suffered a crop failure.

The news of Mr. Shende’s death brought his wife, Vandana, back home to Bhadumari. Relatives said she had gone to tend to her sick brother in a nearby village. By the time she arrived, her husband’s body was covered by a thin checkered cloth.

A policeman had recorded the death — the eighth in six months for the officer.

Ms. Shende, squatting in the narrow village lane, shrouded her face in her cheap blue sari and wailed at the top of her lungs. “Your father is dead,” she screamed at her small son, who stood before her, dazed.

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